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1st Official War Crimes Probe Gets Under Way in Britain

Alleged WWII Atrocities by Immigrants Investigated

By Karen DeYoung
Washington Post Foreign Service

LONDON, March 30—"War Criminals," the big, bold headline reads. "Evidence Wanted."

The advertisement, appearing for the past several days in major British newspapers, asks for information about any current citizen or resident here "responsible for genocide, murder or manslaughter in Germany" or its occupied territories during World War II.

The appeal is the first public foray of an independent War Crimes Inquiry appointed by the government last month after a year-long campaign by the Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center. Its mandate is to examine allegations by the center and others that at least 53 postwar immigrants to Britain, most of them from the Baltic states that are now part of the Soviet Union, were guilty of war crimes.

Such investigations have long been commonplace in many western countries. In West Germany, thousands of cases have been adjudicated. The United States has investigated hundreds of immigrants suspected of lying about their wartime activities. Some, such as Ukrainian-born John Dertjanjuk, now awaiting a verdict after a war crimes trial in Israel, had their naturalized citizenship revoked.

Canada and Australia are conducting far-reaching investigations and have amended their laws to allow prosecution of alleged war criminals living in those countries.

But Britain, one leading Nazi-hunter charged, has been "the last country that wanted to do anything" about allegations that war criminals had slipped in unnoticed after the war.

"Do I think they're moving swiftly enough?" Rabbi Marvin Hier, who heads the Wiesenthal Center, asked in a telephone interview. "No. But if you compare what Britain has been doing over the past 45 years—absolutely nothing—then we have to say there has been some progress. At least we got their attention, and we intend to keep it."

Thomas Hetherington and William Chalmers, both former prosecutors, have begun searching British government archives. In May, they plan to visit Washington for discussions with the Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations, charged with prosecuting Nazi war criminals in the United States.

By fall, they said, they will have begun personal interviews with those who have responded to the advertisements, or have otherwise been indicated as potential witnesses, including some in the Soviet Union. Since the ads began five days ago, they said, at least 50 responses have been received by mail.

The final task of the inquiry, which is expected to last at least a year, will be to advise the government on possible means of dealing with anyone against whom a prima facie case is established. Extraditions to the Soviet Union, on whose territory most of the alleged crimes were committed, already have been ruled out, despite outstanding Soviet requests for at least one person on the Wiesenthal list.

That person is Antanas Gecas, a 71-year-old retired mining engineer living in Edinburgh, who turned up here as a displaced person after the war and became a British citizen in 1956. Gecas, by his own admission, was a member of the 12th Lithuanian Police Battalion that Hier alleged was "Murder Incorporated." But Gecas "vigorously denies" that he took any part in executions, his Edinburgh lawyer said, and already has brought defamation proceedings against one London newspaper that made allegations against him.

Hier called Gecas "the biggest case we have in Britain." The inquiry team, he said, could find "half a dozen credible witnesses" in the Soviet Union "who will testify they saw him commit murder."

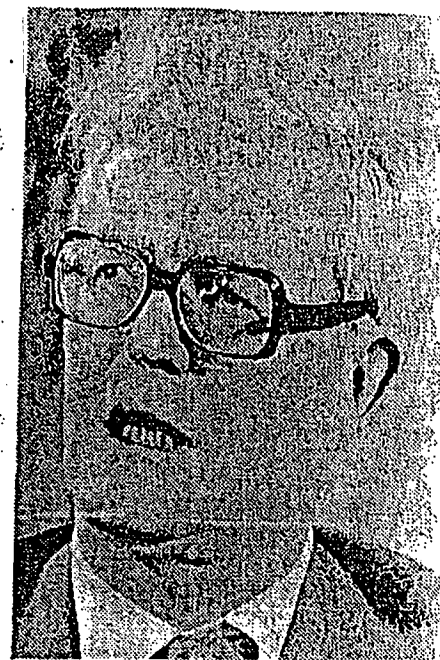
It is possible, although not considered probable, that the British will take the American path of withdrawing the citizenship of those against whom evidence is found.

The only other option, officials said, would be to change British law that prohibits prosecution of anyone who allegedly committed crimes in another country, while not a British citizen. This is the route adopted by Canada and Australia, which are expected to hold their first war crimes trials soon.

So far, Chalmers emphasized today, "I don't think there is the evidence . . . to justify bringing any sort of case against anyone."

British officials apparently made no major effort to screen people for war crimes in the late 1940s. Hundreds of Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians arrived here as prisoners of war after the Nazi defeat.

By the late 1940s, interest in the United States as well as Britain was focused on the new menace of Soviet communism and the need to consolidate a western defense alli-



DOUGLAS HURD

... announced inquiry last month

"They didn't give a damn about the Nazis," said Greville Janner, then a war crimes investigator, and now a Labor Party member of Parliament. Classified British government documents from 1948, released last year in Canada, indicate an active and largely successful effort by London to persuade the rest of the Commonwealth to cease all war crimes investigations.

Pressure for investigations in the United States came from Jewish groups and supporters in Congress in the 1970s, but Britain's Jewish population is relatively small and politically inactive. According to Janner, one of the few Jewish members of Parliament, pressure here came from ex-servicemen who had seen evidence of Nazi atrocities.

But the feeling that it is all water long under the bridge still exists to some extent. When Home Secretary Douglas Hurd announced the inquiry last month, several Conservative members of Parliament denounced it as a pointless "witchhunt."

There have been accusations that the government has destroyed evidence that might indicate embarrassing knowledge of war crimes guilt that was ignored, or might withhold it based on what Janner called its "luciferous obsession with secrecy."

A separate investigation ordered last month by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher into alleged involvement by Austrian President Kurt Waldheim in the 1944 disappearance and assumed execution of six captured British commandos in the Balkans, ground a halt when the government acknowledged crucial documents relating to the case had been destroyed. Copies of the files subsequently had to be obtained from the United States. According to the new inquiry, the government has so far supplied all